

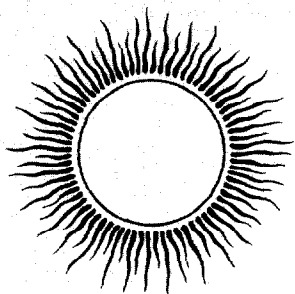
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# HERACLITEAN FIRE

*Sketches from a Life before Nature*

ERWIN CHARGAFF



E. CHARGAFF

## ONE READER'S REACTION

Autobiographies by scientists form a small but select genre, of which the latest and surely one of the best is Erwin Chargaff's *Heraclitean Fire*. Its artfully discontinuous form, its passion alternating with detachment, and its sardonic humor put it in a class apart, where the perplexities and the resigned wisdom of the twentieth-century man of science are mirrored as never before.

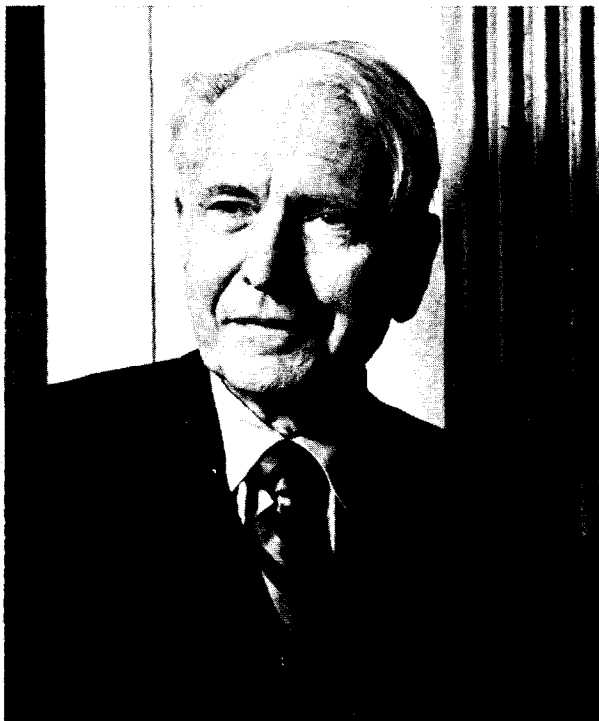
JACQUES BARZUN  
*University Professor Emeritus  
Columbia University*

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## FROM THE BOOK

- Every activity of the human mind has, throughout history, given rise to criticism within its own ranks. . . . Only science has, in our times, become complacent . . . disregarding contemptuously the few timid voices of apprehension.
- Among many other things, I have sometimes been called gloomy. This may be so, although much of my gloom is actually brought on by my looking at the people who call me gloomy. Dealing with a somber subject, I feel it, therefore, incumbent upon me to assure the reader that my tone will be as lighthearted as that of a speculator in Florida real estate inviting the senior citizen to walk into his parlor. All glasses will be half full, wormwood will be called vermouth, bitterness will be semi-sweet, people will not die but pass on, Gehenna will be sanitized.
- What I liked about chemistry was its clarity surrounded by darkness; what attracted me, slowly and hesitatingly to biology was its darkness surrounded by the brightness of the givenness of nature, the holiness of life. And so I have always oscillated between the brightness of reality and the darkness of the unknowable.
- The giant liner *Leviathan* brought me to New York. No sooner had I approached the Land of the Free than I found myself in jail. . . . Imprisoned in that noteworthy American concentration camp [Ellis Island], I had an excellent view of the Statue of Liberty.
- The stress on mechanisms has given rise to one of the curses of our time: the expert. It has made body mechanics out of physicians and cell mechanics out of biologists; and if the philosopher cannot yet be called a brain mechanic, this is only a sign of his backwardness.
- . . . if at one time or another I have brushed a few colleagues the wrong way, I must apologize: I had not realized that they were covered with fur.



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

As early as 1949, Erwin Chargaff described certain irregularities in the composition of DNA and formulated the concept of "complementarity" — later referred to as "Chargaff's rule" and, still later, as "base-pairing" — which was the most important single piece of evidence for the double-helical structure of DNA, to be described by Watson and Crick in 1953. His finding, together with others from his laboratory, has brought Dr. Chargaff many honors and awards from this country and abroad, including the National Medal of Science.

Today Dr. Chargaff is emeritus professor and chairman, biochemistry department, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University.

### ANOTHER READER'S COMMENTS

Few scientists in the United States today stop to reflect how differently Science has been successfully conducted at other times and in other places. Erwin Chargaff's book *Heraclitean Fire* forcefully, and at times bitingly, contrasts American Science in the 1970s with the less frantic, less competitive, and less well-funded research that was carried on in the Central Europe of the 1920s and 1930s, before Hiroshima — and the financial resources of the National Institutes of Health — were even imaginable. Chargaff's life and career have bridged the eventful years since the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into which he was born. With its highly personal blend of nostalgia, wit, and anger, the book is a significant historical and cultural document.

STEPHEN TOULMIN  
*Professor of Social Thought and Philosophy*  
*University of Chicago*